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SUBJECT: AMCIT RABBI ORDERED DEPORTED FOR VISA VIOLATION

¶1. On February 12, a district court in Vladivostok declared American citizen Rabbi Yisroel Silberstein to be in violation of his visa status and ordered him to leave the country. The rabbi had been in Russia for several months on a cultural visa and had been working at the Jewish Religious and Cultural Community Center of Vladivostok. At the hearing PolOff asked the Rabbi whether he saw any political motivation behind his legal problem but the Rabbi declined to speculate.

¶2. According to the Federal Immigration Service, the rabbi had been "engaged in or promoting activities conflicting with the stated purpose of his visa." The judge ruled that his work with the center amounted to religious activity, and therefore violated the terms of his cultural visa. According to Russian law, any foreign citizen in the country as a religious worker must have a residency permit.

¶3. The rabbi's lawyers are appealing the case, and a final decision -- which could include a fine as well as deportation -- will be reached within ten days. As Silberstein's visa was due to expire on February 27, the Rabbi will leave the country by then regardless of the ruling. An adverse ruling would, however, make his planned visa renewal and return difficult if not impossible.

Just What is 'Religious Work'?

¶4. At his hearing, his attorney insisted that the rabbi's work consisted of teaching both Jews and non-Jews about the Jewish culture, and that none of his work could be categorized as "religious work." The lawyer also took the court to task for failing to give concrete examples of the activities that could be considered in violation of the visa. The judge did imply one violation by questioning witnesses about Silberstein's role in the renovation of an old synagogue in the city. The rabbi asserted that helping to raise funds for the renovation 'as a private citizen,' and supervising the work 'to make sure it was done correctly' does not amount to religious activity. Witnesses for the defense asserted that the rabbi's work with the Jewish Center consisted of providing information about various aspects of Judaism, such as the language, food, music, and holidays, and not the religious aspects of the culture.

Rabbi Mugged Last Year

¶5. Late last year, Rabbi Silberstein was the victim of a robbery in downtown Vladivostok. In the early evening of November 10, an unknown assailant hit him in the head three times with a heavy object and stole his laptop. The rabbi was treated at a local hospital for a mild concussion and other injuries and released later that evening. The next day he left Vladivostok for Moscow and Paris on a previously-planned trip.

¶6. Comment. Until his unfortunate assault in November, the Rabbi received virtually no press coverage and maintained a low profile and had not been a victim of harassment by authorities. As yet, there is no indication that the assault and subsequent

deportation ruling are linked, or are part of a concerted campaign against him or his center. It is possible that because of the media coverage of the assault, Silberstein became the focus of attention by immigration authorities.

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